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ABSTRACT

This introduction to second language learning is intended to provide language teachers with basic information on relevant principles and processes. After an introductory chapter, the second chapter looks at traditional beliefs about language learning, including those concerning transfer of first-language knowledge to the second language, the role of practice in language skill development, language content taught, error correction, and relative emphasis on grammar and communicative competence. The third chapter focuses on interlanguage, the process of construction of the target language in the learner's mind, and the stages of interlanguage development. A transcript of utterances (appended) provides concrete examples. Chapter four reviews research on the teachability of language content at various stages of second language learning. The final chapter draws conclusions for classroom practice. Contains 8 references. (MSE)

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Macarthur

Australian Studies in Language Acquisition

Manfred Pienemann

Second Language Acquisition: A First Introduction

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Second Language Acquisition:

A First Introduction

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NLLIA/LARC

University of Western Sydney, Macarthur

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Preface to Second Edition

This paper was originally written by Prof Manfred Pienemann, and produced at LARC for the NSW Department of School Education first Language Intensive Methodology course in 1992.
It is now reprinted in ASLA, with minor editorial intervention, because of requests from language teachers and libraries as well as because of its value as a very clear and highly accessible first reading for Professional Development courses for language teachers with little or no background in second language acquisition.

The original table used has been updated here and divided into two separate tables, one representing stages of syntactic development in the acquisition of English as a second language, with appropriate examples, and the other representing stages in the development of morphological structures with appropriate examples.

The Interlanguage (learner language) transcript originally used to exemplify the discussion has been maintained here with minor editing out of transcribing conventions that were not relevant to the pedagogical purpose of the paper. The speakers' turns (rather than lines) have been numbered for ease of reference.

I am happy for the opportunity offered to LARC by Prof Pienemann, now head of European Languages at the Australian National University, to publish a second edition of this valuable paper.

Bruno Di Biase
NLLIA/LARC
UWS Macarthur

Second language acquisition : A first introduction

Manfred Pienemann

1. Why is it important for language teachers to know about language acquisition?

The study of language acquisition examines the way in which a first or a second language develops. This field of study looks at learning from the learner's own perspective. Such a perspective is quite different from the one that is traditionally taken by language teachers and educators where learning is viewed as a process which is constrained and modelled by such factors as the curriculum, teaching materials and similar factors.

The study of second language acquisition (SLA) takes a different perspective on the process of learning by concentrating on factors which are specific to the learner rather than on those which are specific to the learning environment. This does not mean that the learning environment as such is denied. It simply means that SLA focuses on that one factor, the learner. SLA studies establish a clear reference point for what learners normally do and what they can't do. Once that reference point has been established, it is much easier to evaluate the impact which external variables can have on SLA. It is then possible to determine to what extent we are able to teach certain language structures. *Obviously, this perspective is different from making the bold assumption that anything that one wants to teach can be learnt.*

One has to remember, however, that the study of language acquisition is not in itself a pedagogical exercise. It simply provides some basic psychological information about the process of acquisition. It is then a separate step to use that information in a pedagogical context.

Language teachers should know about the process of language acquisition, because the acquisition processes establish reference points for what can and cannot be taught. On the basis of normal patterns of acquisition the teacher is able to evaluate where his/her students are positioned in relation to standardised patterns of acquisition. Such standardised reference points also enable the teacher to evaluate specific errors and to develop effective treatment of those errors.

Another reason why language acquisition studies are relevant to language teachers is this: the syllabus developed for the teaching over a period of time might turn out to be inefficient and it might be the case that some of the language content that is being taught is not learned because it is not geared towards the learner's level of ability. For these reasons, it is important to know what is learnable at what point in time. The knowledge allows the teacher to adapt any existing syllabus to the exact level of acquisition of their students.

2. Some traditional beliefs about language acquisition

The purpose of this paper is to carefully introduce some new and scientific concepts in relation to the learning of languages into the context of traditional language teaching.

We want to do this with care because we do not want to suggest that second language acquisition is a type of new method of language teaching. We are not suggesting that teachers should get ready for yet another change in teaching methodology. Obviously, traditional language teaching works to some extent and has some deficiencies as well. But over the last twenty-five years or so, researchers have accumulated a fair amount of scientific information about psychological and sociological aspects of second language acquisition. We are now in a position to utilise some of that knowledge. In order to connect that knowledge to traditional ideas about language learning it will be useful to review some of the traditional beliefs held by language teachers or by the community in general and to evaluate to what extend these beliefs can be upheld in the light of recent findings from second language acquisition research.

One of those generally held beliefs is that second languages *are learned in contrast to the first language* and, in fact, this belief is intuitively very appealing. One reason for that is that it is easy to distinguish for instance a French accent in English from a German accent in English. It seems that in relation to the pronunciation of a language, the first language leaves very clear marks.

We do not want to dispute these observations at all. However it is one thing to say that the first language leaves some kind of trace in the learning of a second language and it is a different thing to say that this is the main principle on which the learning of a second language is based.

Let us take a moment to see what this means. If it was in fact true that second languages were learned exclusively on the basis of the contrast between the first and the second language, then we would have to expect that whenever there is a difference between first and second language, we would find a learning problem and we could predict exactly when an error will occur in the learning of the second language.

It is quite likely that second language teachers will be able to recall a whole number of examples which seem to fit this description. Let us exemplify this process with the acquisition of German as the second

or foreign language on the basis of English. As we all know, English uses what is called do-support in negation and in the formation of questions. For instance, "Do you like that hairstyle?" Quite often we can observe that learners of German as a foreign language with English as the first language would produce sentences like, "Tust du das mögen?" [Do you that like?]. In cases like this, we can very clearly see the influence of the first language on second language acquisition.

As I said above, we do not want to dispute that such examples exist. On the contrary, almost everyone has witnessed such a transfer from the L1 to the L2. The point we want to concentrate on here is to see whether this transfer is the only and the predominant mechanism by which second languages are being learnt. If transfer was indeed the primary SLA mechanism, we would be able to make a number of predictions which can be tested in the language actually produced by second language learners.

Let us look at a very simple example. In English we distinguish between 'why' and 'because'. 'Why' is used in questions and 'because' is used in certain types of subordinate clauses. A very similar distinction is made in German as well. Here the words are "weil" and "warum". In Italian, such a distinction is not made. There is only one word for 'why' and 'because' which is 'perché'.

Now, according to the traditional belief about the transfer from the first to the second language one would expect the following to happen. Italian learners of German ought to find it difficult to make the weil-warum distinction because that distinction does not exist in Italian. On the other hand, we would expect that English learners of German would not have that problem because the two languages, German and English, make exactly the same distinction.

Researchers have analysed great quantities of language produced by second language learners and they have been able to test the hypothesis we put forward. They found the following: Italian learners of German do, indeed, have the problem that we predicted. They find it difficult to make the warum-weil distinction. The surprising thing comes with English learners of German: They have the same problem. That clearly falsifies the transfer hypothesis. Therefore we have to ask ourselves just why the English learners of German did not transfer the knowledge that they have in their first language? We will address this question in detail below. The basic point we can infer from this observation is the following: making a distinction between warum and weil is something that learners from different first language backgrounds find difficult. This concept of a

general difficulty in the learning of a second language highlights a principle in second language acquisition research. While traditional SL studies concentrated on differences between the first and the second language, *the new paradigm focuses on learning difficulties which arise in the learner's reconstruction of the second language.*

Another general belief is 'practice makes perfect'. Again, this belief is intuitively very appealing and we do not want to deny its general validity. For instance, if someone doesn't know how to ride a bicycle, he or she will practice and the more they practise, the more they will acquire the skill of cycling. The same applies to swimming or driving a car.

The point we want to concentrate on now is that this general belief does not always make sense. Let's take an example from real life again. It would not be plausible, for instance, to get a child to write or read at the age of one. The child could practise as much as possible, but under normal circumstances, it is simply impossible for the child to learn reading and writing at that early age. In a similar way, it would be premature to get a child to walk at the age of 3 months because at that age it has not developed to the point where walking can be acquired.

We can transfer the same concept to the learning of a second language. *While practise is absolutely necessary to achieve a certain level of skill in the use of a language, it does not necessarily guarantee that the skill will be acquired. The learner might be practising things which he or she is not ready to learn at that particular point in time.* We will look at some specific examples and experimental studies in some of the sections that follow below.

Let us go on to the next general belief which says that *the teaching program determines which items of the second language will be learnt.* Again, at face value this belief makes perfect sense. If there is no input, there will be no output. So *the teaching program is absolutely essential unless the second language is learned in a naturalistic environment. Also, if certain items are not introduced, they cannot be learnt.* If the teaching program contains many items, then more items can be learnt. The problem with this perspective is that there is *no guarantee that this learning will happen and that it will happen at the rate foreseen in the teaching program.* It may be the case that structures are being introduced which are *too difficult to learn at that particular point in time in relation to the learner's own language development. It may be the case that too many structures are being introduced simultaneously or in a succession that is too close.* In other words, while *the input is absolutely necessary, it does*

not guarantee progress since the inclusion of a linguistic item in a syllabus does not guarantee that it is *in accordance with the principles which underlie the learner's own reconstruction of the target language.*

Another belief that is generally held by many language teachers is that *errors* should be eradicated as soon as possible. Some people might think that this is a very radical position to take, but the ones who are in favour of it believe that by correction they will avoid the second language learner producing a pattern which is later difficult to rectify. There are a number of problems with this error eradication attitude. The first is a psychological one. If a learner cannot relax and is constantly being hassled to produce something that in the eyes of the language teacher is error-free, then they will be concentrating much more on the form of the language than on its content. In this situation language learners become intimidated and lack confidence in the use of the language.

This is compounded by a second factor. We have seen above that in some cases, all language learners make very similar mistakes. For instance, they might be missing the why-because distinction in the learning of English. This happens because of the genuine complexity of this distinction. In other words, such errors occur because language is being reconstructed and it develops in a natural way. This means that the errors are not a reflection of a bad learning habit. On the contrary, such errors demonstrate that the learner reconstructs the target language in his or her own mind. In other words, the error is an indicator of the creative and constructive use of the second language. This is a concept that some language teachers might find difficult to accept because there appears to be a contradiction in terms. Errors are normally seen as something negative and a bad learning behaviour and not as creative language use. It is interesting to note that even in language behaviour which contains errors, learners are behaving in a systematic rule-governed way. For example, learners who say "goed" for "went" are showing that they have acquired the regular past tense, but not yet the irregular. They are following a rule. This aspect will be reconciled further below in this article.

The last in our list of general beliefs is in opposition to the previous one. Some teachers are of the opinion that it doesn't matter at all whether language learners produce errors. The main thing they believe one has to concentrate on is the fact that the students can communicate. This belief is very much supported by current trends in teaching methodology. Grammar and the formal learning of grammatical structures is very much considered a thing of the past and

in most cases language teachers concentrate on a communicative approach to teaching.

We do not wish to dispute the value of communicative language teaching. In fact communicative language teaching is not something that was invented in the past few decades. It has existed in the field for centuries. It has made perfect sense to generations of language teachers that the main objective of language teaching is to be able to communicate. However, it would be a misunderstanding of the meaning of communication if this was to imply that errors in the form of the language do not matter at all. The main reason behind this is that almost every form that occurs in a language also carries a function or a meaning. It is completely obvious, and contextually appropriate, what it means when someone says "Me Tarzan, you Jane". However, such an utterance would have a spectacular effect if it was placed in the situation of a headmaster addressing his year 12 students, "Me headmaster, you students". Leaving out grammatical items such as the verb "to be" is a feature of simplified registers such as foreigner talk, or the language used to address deaf people or the way we speak to little children. It is obvious that if the learner's language contains such features, then he/she will be judged appropriately. Whether we like it or not, if the second language speaker uses many of those features, he or she will be more likely to be judged as lacking in intelligence.

Apart from this socio-psychological implication of errors, many errors also affect the meaning of sentences. It does make a difference whether we say, "I am going home" or "I go home" or "I must go home". To cut a long story short, the danger of a simplified communicative approach in language teaching is that it may support simplified registers and that it might in this way affect not only the structure of the second language but also the way in which the second language speaker is perceived by native speakers of the language.

3. Interlanguage

The reader will recall from the previous section, that the language learner cannot be viewed either as a sponge taking up new information or a parrot simply repeating linguistic items. Instead we characterised the language learner as someone who is actively involved in the reconstruction of the target language in his or her own mind.

The product of this creative construction process is referred to as "interlanguage". In this section we will explore the term interlanguage in some more depth. For that purpose we will look at transcripts of interlanguage produced by second language learners of English. You will find the transcripts in the appendix to this article. We will use one structural domain to exemplify what we mean by creative construction in relation to the learning of the second language. This area is the formation of questions in English.

Generally speaking, it has been found that second language learners tackle learning problems which are inherent in the second language in a very similar way or sequence. As an end result, there are striking similarities in the shape of interlanguages at similar stages of development.

Researchers have proposed many different reasons for this phenomenon. For the purpose of this paper, we will not need to go into any of the theoretical explanations for similar orders of acquisition. It will simply be sufficient to state that much research has been carried out to support the view that interlanguages develop along predictable and clearly describable paths. We will later see that this feature of interlanguages comes very handy in teaching practice specifically in the context of syllabus construction, language assessment and error correction.

Let us now turn to one such sequence of acquisition to get a better feel for the phenomenon. The basic sequence in the acquisition of English question formation is summarised in Table 1 below. The first phase in the acquisition of question formation is the production of single word questions like "here?", with rising intonation, other examples are "this one?" or "my money?". As we can see, we have to stretch the definition of word in this context a little bit because in terms of the target language, 'my money' really consists of two words. However we know that the learner stores 'my money' as one big word. There are many such "words" or "units" that we can find at the early stage in ESL development. They might be as big as, "How are you?" or "Where's the toilet please?"

Once the learner produces something that we can identify as sentences (or utterances consisting of several words), we find that these sentences have a very specific structure. They simply follow an SVO pattern. Now this pattern is followed even in questions. Examples are, "He is here?", "You go home?" The only way in which we can tell that these are questions is by the rising intonation. Word order remains the same in statements and in questions at this particular stage.

At stage three we can see that the learner has alternated word order slightly. There are two types of questions that we find at that stage: yes/no-inversion and copula inversion. The term "inversion" refers to the fact that the verb and the subject swap places. This phenomenon is used extensively in Germanic languages to mark questions. At this stage, the learner produces a question like, "Is he here?" which is correct English. In this structure, the verb is in initial position in the sentence and the intonation rises. This doesn't mean that the learner has acquired all of the structures that are necessary to form all possible question types in English.

At stage four, all of the questions that will be learned at stages five and six, are formed incorrectly. A stage four learner would say, for instance, "Where you have lost it?" rather than "Where have you lost it?" and he or she would say, "I wonder where is he?" because copula inversion would be over-generalised to the context of indirect questions. In other words, the learners display some sort of fingerprint in the structure of their interlanguage which gives away the current stage of their language acquisition.

At stage four then the learner acquires the ability to place the auxiliary in second position in WH questions as in "Where have you lost it?" and finally in stage five, the learner acquires the ability to distinguish between direct and indirect questions.

The transcript in the appendix contains a stretch of discourse which centres around asking questions. It is based on a conversation between a researcher and a second language learner. The purpose of that research is not of any relevance here, however, it is important to appreciate the nature of transcribed conversations. For someone who has never looked at the written version of a spoken text, it may be quite surprising to see how different the spoken language is from the written. There are many incomplete sentences, false starts, repetitions, self corrections, ehm and ums, quite often two or more people speak simultaneously, some people talk only and never listen, so that the other person has to repeat his or her message several times and so on and so forth.

It is important to be aware of these features because otherwise, one might make the mistake of attributing a lack of well-formedness in this document of spoken language to the learner's lack of progress in language acquisition, while in reality, these features are quite a normal feature of spoken language.

Bearing this proviso in mind, we can now look at the transcript which contains a number of examples of interlanguage forms of questions. Turn 60 contains an SVO question. "He is very nervous?" That example corresponds to stage 2 in our table. Turn 86 contains an example which relates to an application of auxiliary second stage 5 in our table. The question is, "Why she go to the doctors?" As we know, this type of WH-question requires 'do' insertion. In other words the auxiliary 'do' should have been placed in second position. Instead the learner simply left the sentence in its SVO pattern: which is preceded by 'why'. This also exemplifies the point we made about the learner's creative construction.

Looking from the perspective of the target language, the sentence in turn 86 constitutes an error, a deviation from the target language norm. On the other hand, looking from the learner's perspective, the learner is doing something creative. Rather than forming an SVO question, she places a WH-pronoun in front of the SVO pattern to produce a WH question. We have to appreciate that the addition of the WH-pronoun has increased the learner's expressiveness and it has also added one grammatical rule to her interlanguage. As can be seen from Table 1 it will take this learner a while to learn that in the context of a wh-word an auxiliary has to be placed in second position.

It is again a separate task for the learner to work out which auxiliary belongs where. In some cases the verb "have" is required in second position. Sometimes it may be "do", sometimes "does" or some other form of these two verbs.

We can see that the learner identifies very small and manageable learning tasks and decomposes the target language into small bits. This makes it possible for him or her to gradually acquire the target language. This is also the reason why the interlanguage goes through a succession of incomplete grammars - incomplete only in relation to the target language.

If you now look at turn 92, you will find an interesting example of another attempt to produce a WH-question. The example is, "What is he takes?" In this example we do actually find an auxiliary in second position. In relation to word order, this question is formed correctly.

However, the incorrect form of the auxiliary has been inserted in second position. (Instead of 'is' it should have been 'does'.) You will also note that the agreement marking on the verb is incorrect. In English, "person" is only marked on one verb. Once it is marked on the auxiliary, it must not be marked again on the lexical verb. However, this deviation from the target language is not related auxiliary-second placement but to quite a different grammatical phenomenon, namely that of subject-verb agreement marking.

It is important to realise that the level of grammatical correctness is not the same as the level of acquisition. Rather than measuring correctness, SLA researchers are looking at what the learner is trying to produce, in the case of the example in turn 92, it is a WH question, which required the verb in the second position. The attempt in itself has been successful. A form of an auxiliary is in the correct position. On the other hand the form itself is incorrect and so is the form of the lexical verb. Because of the complexity of this task, the learner ran a number of risks. One risk was to produce the incorrect form of the auxiliary and it is only because of that risk-taking behaviour that the learner has produced an error. However it was for the same reason that she produced a novel structure. SLA researchers look at all these phenomena as equally interesting.

You might now find it useful to go through the transcripts step by step and then analyse the questions produced by the informant (= A) in relation to the structures contained in Table 1. The purpose of this exercise would be to gain hands-on experience with the learner's language. Please note that we are using English only for one reason, namely, because it is the language that all the participants of this seminar have in common.

The purpose of that exercise is not to learn about English grammar, instead it is meant to give you an opportunity to focus on features of interlanguage and to relate those to a developmental pattern.

Let me make a final remark on the practicality of this exercise. You should use the form in the appendix called "interlanguage analysis" and enter the number of the turn in the box provided for this purpose.

We have established the fact that there is rule-governed behaviour or systematicity in the acquisition of languages. This systematicity relates to development. Another important notion in relation to acquisition is the fact that there are different types of learners. By this we mean that different learners can behave differently in relation to the solution of learning problems.

In the examples which we looked at above, we were able to see that there are different solutions to the learning of auxiliary second placement. We have to remember that this rule can only be learned at a relatively late point in time and after all of the preceding rules have to be learnt. This means that for a relatively long period of time, the learner is bound to produce what we might call a developmental error. Every time he or she produces a WH-question, the learner is bound to make a mistake because he or she is not ready to produce auxiliary second structures.

In this situation one type of learner will simply leave the auxiliary out altogether. The resulting structure sounds something like this, "Where he works?" Alternatively, the learner could also leave out the subject of the sentence, for instance, "Where works?". A third solution is to fill the second position with an incorrect form of the auxiliary.

In large studies it was found that learners who tend to omit grammatical information in the sentence tend to do this in various contexts, and as a result their interlanguage appears to be more simplified than other types of interlanguages. This is despite the fact these different interlanguage "dialects" are positioned at the same level of development.

This second learner type can perhaps be described as not running as many risks. Consequently they appear to be more target-oriented. Running risks simply means to produce structures which necessitate other structure. One example is the WH fronting in WH questions which necessitates the auxiliary in second position. If the learner avoids those contexts altogether, then the subsequent structure (auxiliary second), becomes unnecessary.

Table 1

Stages in ESL Acquisition: Syntactic structures (updated 1994)

(adapted from: Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley 1988)

Stage	Syntax	Examples
6	Cancel Inversion	I wonder where he is I asked him where he is from
5	Do -2nd Aux - 2nd Neg- Do 2nd	Seldom do I go there Why did she eat that? Where have you lost it? He does not like it
4	Y/N inversion copula inversion Particle shift	Have you seen him? Is she at home? Where is she? Turn the tap off
3	Topicalization Do- fronting Adverb Fronting Neg+ Verb	Cheese I like Do he live here? Today he stay here He don't ask
2	Neg+SVO SVO? SVO	No me live here You live here? you live here John eat rice
1	Single words Formulae	Where is X? How are you? hello

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Table 2

Stages in ESL Acquisition: Morphology (updated 1994)

(adapted from: Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley 1988)

Stage	Morphology	+ (supplied)	> (oversupplied)	– (not supplied in obligatory context)
6				
5	3 pers. singular -s Adverb -ly	He eats run slowly	He is eats fastly	he eat run slow
4	possessive -s plural -s	Pat's cat two cats	He saw Pat's a cats	Pat cat two cat
3	past -ed -ing	she played going	she goed shop wenting	yesterday she go -------
2	generic -s	cats are nice	--------	cat is nice
1	Single words, Formulae	hello Central How are you?		

4. Teachability

All of the characteristics of second language acquisition which we reviewed up to here apply to the so-called naturalistic context of language acquisition; i.e. to the situation where a second language is learned without instruction. It is therefore quite important to explore to what extent these findings also apply to the classroom context.

It is quite conceivable to think that the learning of a second language in the classroom would be quite different from naturalistic acquisition. After all, the two contexts are rather different. In naturalistic acquisition the input is not filtered in any way. The learner has some sort of survival needs in the language, and there is social pressure to communicate adequately. In the classroom, on the other hand, the input is filtered, there are certain teaching methodologies and teaching programs, textbooks and the learner is being examined on a formal basis.

We have to remember, however, that this is simply a description of the context in which acquisition takes place and describing the context of a learning process does not guarantee that one will find different processes. We might use a rather simplistic comparison to illustrate this point. Let us compare, for instance, the way a plant would grow in a greenhouse and in the garden. Most likely, there will be some differences. But nevertheless, a rose will still be a rose inside a greenhouse and outside in the garden.

This comparison might sound rather ridiculous but it is quite valid, because in the same way as a rose develops leaves and blossoms, the language develops grammatical structures. And in the same way as there is a growth pattern in a developing plant, we have seen above that there is a pattern of growth in the second language acquisition. Therefore it is quite reasonable to expect language to grow into similar patterns in different environments.

Nevertheless, it is important to study empirically to what extent language acquisition does also take place in the classroom. As in the previous sections, we are not able to go into details about the many studies. All we can do here is to summarise the basic trends that were found in large bodies of research over the past two decades.

For the purpose of summarising this research, we might go back to the traditional beliefs that we discussed in Section 2 namely the belief that the teaching program determines which items are being learnt and at what rate. If this was actually the case, then it ought to be possible to alter the naturalistic pattern in second language acquisition through

the means of teaching. Many traditional language teachers might agree to the following view on naturalistic and classroom language acquisition. In this view, classroom acquisition is seen as the purer form of learning because it is seen to be happening under the control of the teacher, whereas naturalistic language acquisition is seen as some sort of uncontrolled or wild learning process, very much like an untamed animal or uncontrolled growth in what ought to be a beautiful garden. In this view, it would seem that all the errors that occur in naturalistic acquisition can simply be avoided by taking care in introducing the correct forms and avoiding errors wherever possible. This view has been tested empirically and in the present context we can summarise the basic trend of the results.

Empirical studies were set up in the following way: A large number of learners were screened for their level of development, and a sizeable group of learners at a particular stage, let us refer to this stage now as 'Stage 2', was selected. It was then attempted to teach a structure that is positioned at stage 4, i.e. 2 steps ahead of the learner's current level of development. The logic behind this experiment is the following: If in fact it is possible to get the learners to skip one stage of acquisition through formal teaching, then teaching is indeed as powerful as the traditional view would assume. However, if it isn't, then we would have to assume, that the constraints which are imposed on naturalistic acquisition are in force also in the classroom.

The result of the studies (which include a number of replication studies) is very clear: It is not possible for learners to skip stages of acquisition. At the same time teaching a structure when a learner is ready for it does speed up the acquisition process. For instance, it was found that if stage 2 learners were exposed to the teaching of a structure at stage 3, then this teaching process speeds up the acquisition process and the accuracy in the usage of the form.

These experiments establish the fact that there are certain constraints on the teachability of languages. On the other hand, these teachability constraints do not include the written language or the formal learning of grammar. In the above studies, learners at level 2 were quite able to explain the nature of structures at level 4 and also to manipulate those structures in written exercises given that there was enough time. However, once it came to spontaneously producing language, these very same learners failed to correctly apply structures at level 4.

Finally it is important to note that these experiments were carried out in a variety of different contexts. One context was in a bilingual program in a country of immigration while the second context was a university foreign language program.

5. Conclusions For Teaching Practice

The fact that language learners pass through fixed stages of acquisition, that the learner breaks the target language up into small units in a fixed order, and that there are clearly identifiable constraints on the teachability of languages, all of these observations have implications for teaching practices. The three main areas that are affected were mentioned before: syllabus construction, assessment and error correction.

In this section we will briefly address each of these areas. Let us begin with error correction. In section 2 we summarised two extreme views on error correction. One was that errors must be eradicated as early as possible. The opposite view was that errors don't really matter as long as the students can get the message across.

We noticed above that in contrast to both these views many errors simply have to occur due to the fact that the learner constructs his or her own version of the target language. One example that we looked at was the formation of questions in English. For a long period of time, WH-questions do not contain auxiliaries in second position because that is too complex for the learner. Naturally, it will be unrealistic of the teacher to expect the learner to produce this structure.

It makes sense not to expect any learning output that is too complex for the learner. This is a principle which language teachers have believed in for a long time. The news value behind second language acquisition research is that we are now in a position to define what it means to say that a structure is too complex for learner A. We can now assess the learner's exact level of acquisition and we can assess exactly which grammatical constructions are too complex and which aren't.

With this knowledge, we are in a position to evaluate errors in relation to the specific level of acquisition of the learner who produces the error. It is then possible to decide whether the error is developmental, or whether the learner oversimplifies something which he or she has already acquired. It is in the latter case that teaching can indeed be efficient in eliminating the error.

This leads us to the second application of SLA research to teaching practice, namely language testing.

Quite obviously, it is necessary to be able to assess the learner's level of development before any conclusions for error corrections can be drawn. In this context the word assessment has a very specific

meaning. It relates to an objective evaluation of the learner's language in relation to standard patterns in the acquisition of the target language.

For a number of languages such standard patterns are available because a great amount of research has been carried out for these languages. These are in particular, English, German, Swedish and Dutch. Some new research for French and Spanish is also available. It is also important to note that the assessment procedure needed for this purpose is likely to be quite different from traditional language tests. The objective in a screening procedure is not to test the learner's grammatical knowledge. Instead the objective concentrates on the learner's skill in spontaneous spoken language. And the only realistic and objective way to assess that is through tasks which involve spontaneous language production.

Such a procedure, known as profiling, has been constructed for a number of languages and training in those procedures is currently available. The basic scenario for such a procedure is the following: the student engages in a number of communicative goal-based tasks, such as describing a picture, either with the teacher or with fellow students. These tasks are designed to elicit the kind of language that is needed in order to find out whether the student can handle specific grammatical structures. The analyst then observes the student's behaviour. On the basis of this observation, it is possible to obtain an objective and reliable profile of the student's interlanguage within about 15 minutes.

It should be added that special skills are required to carry out such an assessment. The assessor obviously has to be able to monitor the student's interlanguage very rapidly. It has been shown that this skill can be acquired through specialist training over a relatively short period of time. This skill would prove very valuable in normal classroom practice too, since it enables the teacher to monitor the students' language in normal classroom interaction. This amounts to language testing in the process of language teaching.

The third major area on which second language acquisition research has an impact is syllabus construction. If the student follows his or her own internal syllabus, then the teacher will be well advised to synchronise the students' internal syllabus with the teaching program. Otherwise a situation will occur where the program objectives are in conflict with the students' internal syllabus.

Again it is important to note that this synchronisation process would not replace existing approaches to syllabus construction. It would

merely inform them in an objective and relevant way. These days the most common approach to syllabus construction is a version of a communicative syllabus. Most textbooks which are used in foreign language teaching follow a syllabus which includes principles of grading. This is the case we want to concentrate on in the present context.

Synchronising the learner's internal syllabus with the teaching objectives means to introduce two different kinds of grading principles for the construction of the syllabus. One principle is derived from the traditional approach to syllabus construction. In the context of communicative language teaching this would take the form of speech acts or communicative functions or similar things of that nature. The learner's internal syllabus, on the other hand, is structured along the lines of complexity and learnability.

The general point we wish to make is the following. Even within the communicative syllabus, one has to select certain discrete items: e.g. grammatical forms, and aspects of pronunciation, in order to make the syllabus digestible.

It would now be tempting to jump to the conclusion of replacing this principle of selection and grading with the learner's internal syllabus. However, this would be problematic. The learner does produce a large range of grammatical errors which are in fact unavoidable. But accepting the unavoidability in the learner's production is a different thing from introducing these errors in the teaching program.

This situation creates a dilemma for the synchronisation of the two grading principles. On the one hand, we want to ensure that the teaching objectives will be learnable when they are being taught. On the other hand, we want to avoid teaching ungrammatical forms. The solution is really quite simple. Many of the structures which are produced by the language learner are not ungrammatical. Therefore it is possible to synchronise the teaching objectives with these structures. Many of these forms are not contained in traditional textbooks. It is also possible to avoid the teaching of structures at a time when they are not learnable. Those structures can be scheduled for a time when they are learnable.

We would like to point out that this discussion about the applicability of SLA research to classroom practise has taken place in a wider context and this paper contains a number of references which will make it possible for participants of this seminar to familiarise themselves with further aspects of debate on applying SLA research to teaching practice.

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7. Appendix

Interlanguage Transcript

Situation: The researcher is eliciting language from the learner by showing a series of pictures and asking the learner to guess the story with some help from the researcher/interviewer who knows the story. The learner needs to ask the researcher questions in order to get enough information to piece the story together. What follows is a partial transcription of what both people said where:
I= Interviewer
A = Learner of English as a Second Language

N. B. The progressive numbering refers to the turn each speaker takes. Some of the "turns" in this transcript are used as examples in the paper, where they are referred to by turn number.

1. I now we..we're going to do something..a little bit different. I'm going to show you some pictures. OK? and.. behind the picture ther there is a story the pictures are part of the story.
2. A yeah.
3. I and what you must do is ask me questions
4. A mhm
5. I to try and understand...what the pictures mean what is the story that the pictures are telling OK??
6. A OK. what is the man doing?
7. I em...he is going into a building.
8. A oh what time is..er..he go to the building?
9. I I think..two o'clock
10. A two o'clocks what is..er..his job?
11. I he is a businessman.
12. A businessman.
13. I the building is not his office.
14. A the building is not (his) office. (gap) where where's he is...going?
15. I it's a hospital
16. A hospital why is he...go to the hospital?
17. I he's going to visit...someone.
18. A his wife?

19. I yes
20. A his wife. (gap) what happened er...with his wife?
21. I em...she had their baby.
22. A he had the(ir) baby. (gap) is the baby girl or boy?
23. I it's a boy
24. A it's boy ..it's er he have one baby?
25. I just one.
26. A just one...mmm
27. I look at this picture what's the difference between him?
28. A oh..er..he smile in there and...he look sad.
29. I mmm
30. A why why he... look sads in the in the picture?
31. I mmm...he he had a fight with his wife.
32. A oh (gap) why is he fight with his wife?
33. I they were fighting about the name [of]
34. A [the] name of
35. I the child.
36. A the child. (gap) why is he fight about..er with his...er with his wife about the names?
37. I because he wanted one name.
38. A yes
39. I and his wife wanted another [name].
40. A [mhm]. (gap) can you tell me...er...finally...the name of the baby?
41. I mmm finally the name of the baby was Mike.
42. A why (gap) why why he (d) unhappy?
43. I because he did not choose the name Mike.
44. A oh (gap) and where is the baby...er...in inside?
45. I the baby's with its mother. (gap) yeah, so that's the story they were fighting about..choosing a name. so we're going to do the same now with a different picture a bit more difficult perhaps.
46. A what is he write in the diary?
47. I I think he's writing about a meeting.
48. A meeting (gap) who who is the man?
49. I um...this is a man who asked to meet Joe.
50. A where he em where did she met with..his friend?
51. I um they they are meeting outside Central station...but he is not his friend.
52. A (gap) not his friends? who is h who is he?
53. I he is the person who telephoned and asked to meet Joe.
54. A he didn't know before?
55. I he didn't know before.
56. A what are...er they doing...in the station?
57. I they are meeting so that Joe can...buy something.
58. A buy something and this picture...he's very sads. why...he's very sads?

59. I he is not sad
60. A he is very nervous?
61. I not nervous
62. A not nervous she he he sicks?
63. I yes
64. A oh. (gap) why why is he is he sicks?
65. I this man made him...sick, made him ill
66. A what's the mans speaks to him?
67. I um...he is giving him something selling him something.
68. A do you know the mans...mmm...selling...(gap) do you know whats she selling to the man?
69. I mmm...he's selling him some medicine.
70. A medicine? what kind of medicine?
71. I it's an antidote [for]
72. A [ant]
73. I poison.
74. A poison
75. I someone..put the poison in his food.
76. A oh this man put...the poison to the to his food?
77. I yes
78. A why the man put...the poison?
79. I because...he wanted to get money...from this man.
80. A Yes. this man...has the money and...she give to the other man? why she er why she give the money to the this man?
81. I because he was very sick.
82. A she buy something from this man?
83. I yes
84. A the medicine?
85. I the medicine
86. A why she go to the doctors er if she buy somethings?
87. I mm, he wanted the doctor to inject
88. A [injects]
89. I [the medicine] for him. can we talk about this?
90. A (gap) she want open the case?...he want take something..from the case?
91. I perhaps...yes.
92. A what is he takes? in
93. I perhaps he takes the money.
94. A the money.
95. I (gap) Joe does not have a job...but he has money.
96. A he is a he is a (rich) man? rich man?
97. I mmm not really but...he gets money.
98. A (gap) oh...he is a...mercen...is a...is an... am I right? he er...he is a me..
99. I mercenary? I think he is a criminal.
100. A (gap) he is a bad man?

101. I he gets money by breaking the law.
102. A (gap) oh she she buy medicine er ..from this man and she...er...he...he wants the doctor...injection the..?
103. I yes this man telephoned Joe and told him something.
104. A what what is the mans told...to the to him?
105. I he told him that he had been given poison and he would die.
106. A mmm is he a bad man?
107. I yes
108. A (gap) why why he...don't call the policeman for catch the man?.
109. I because he is a criminal as well OK, I think that's that's fine.

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Stages in ESL Acquisition
(adapted from: Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley 1988)

Researcher:
Informant:
Interview:

Stage	Syntax	Example	Turn n
6	Cancel Inv		
5	Do -2nd Aux - 2nd Neg- Do 2nd		
4	Y/N inversion copula inv Particle shift		
3	Topicalization Do- fronting Adverb Fronting Neg+ Verb		
2	Neg+SVO SVO? SVO		
1	Single words formulae		

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Other publications ASLA (1995)
2. Pienemann, M. W. Second Language Acquisition: A First Introduction
3. Dyson B. A Teacher's Perspective on Form-focused Instruction

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